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DEMOGRAPHIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS: CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS

Progress report on civil registration and vital statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

This report presents a review of the developments in civil registration and vital statistics since the twenty-first session of the Statistical Commission. First, activities carried out at the global level are discussed, followed by activities implemented at the regional level (paras. 2-20). Secondly, the report focuses on advances and issues in the improvement of national civil registration and vital statistics systems, including related advances in data processing technology and dissemination (paras. 21-33) and discusses the uses of vital records and vital statistics (paras. 34-44). The report also summarizes the types of technical co-operation activities rendered to countries, upon request, in the past 10 years, the progress made, problems encountered and future needs (paras. 45-55). Finally, a short description of the new International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems, which features a new approach in technical co-operation, is presented (paras. 56-63). Points for discussion by the Commission are included (para. 64).

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INTRODUCTION

1. At its twenty-first session, in 1981, the Commission considered a progress report on civil registration and vital statistics systems. The demand for current demographic statistics has, since then, substantially increased, particularly at sub-national and community levels. As a result, there is increased interest in civil registration and vital statistics by Governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, the subject has not been considered by the Commission since 1981. Accordingly, the present report was prepared, as requested, by the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Co-ordination of the Commission at its thirteenth session, held in Geneva from 11 to 24 September 1989. The report deals with the progress made in civil registration and vital statistics at the global, regional and country levels and summarizes important advances made. Issues relating to further improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems are also discussed, including the types of technical co-operation activities and support provided by the United Nations to member States. Also, with regard to future technical co-operation activities, a short description of and progress report on the newly initiated International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems in Developing Countries is provided.

I. ACTIVITIES SINCE THE TWENTY-FIRST SESSION OF THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION

A. Global level

1. Revision of the Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods

2. As part of the contining work of the United Nations in implementing the World Programme for the Improvement of Vital Statistics, adopted by the Economic and Social Council in resolution 1307 (XLIV) of 31 May 1968, the Statistical Office has completed the revision of the Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods. The Handbook has two volumes. Volume I was completed and submitted for publication in early 1990, 1/ and volume II was published in 1984. 2/ The revised Handbook takes into account developments in national practices and methods in recent years and provides suggestions and guidance to countries in their efforts to implement the international recommendations on vital statistics systems published by the United Nations, 3/ which remain fully valid and widely used. The current Handbook supersedes the Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods, published by the United Nations in 1955. 4/

2. A study on approaches in population censuses to collecting information for estimating vital rates

3. In connection with the preparation of the Population and Housing Census Handbook, the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat has reviewed some 370 population and housing censuses carried out between 1964 and 1985 in order

to examine various approaches that were employed in the collection of statistics on fertility and mortality. Part II of the Handbook presents the results of this study, including questions asked on fertility and mortality, the kinds of data collected by countries in their population censuses and the way the data were tabulated. The Handbook is expected to be completed and submitted for publication in late 1990 or early 1991.

3. Compilation and dissemination of vital statistics

4. The Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat has continued the compilation and dissemination of vital statistics through its annual publication of the United Nations Demographic Yearbook. Eight new editions of the Demographic Yearbook have been published since the twenty-first session of the Statistical Commission. In each issue, birth, death, marriage and divorce statistics for the latest available years are published for every reporting country or area. Further, the 1982 issue included marriage and divorce statistics as a special topic. The 1985 issue treated mortality as a special topic, and the 1986 issue featured fertility as a special topic.

5. From the completed questionnaires used in compiling the Demographic Yearbook, it emerges that 102 out of 205 countries or areas (50 per cent) consider their birth registration to be complete, and 95 countries or areas (46 per cent) have reported complete death registration. 5/ The remaining countries either indicated that they consider their birth and death registration less than 90 per cent complete or provided no information at all. Marriage, divorce and foetal death statistics have different degrees of coverage. There has been some improvement in registration completeness in a number of countries during the past four decades, since the beginning of the United Nations work in the field of international demographic statistics compilation. For instance, in 1950, only 52 and 53 countries or areas out of 144 reported complete birth and death registration, respectively. However, the quality of vital statistics obtained from civil registration systems in many countries is still not satisfactory, and it is particularly weak in data relating to causes of death. Despite the limited overall progress achieved over the decades, in recent years a combination of factors has resulted in improvements in the functioning of civil registration systems in several developing countries. 6/

B. Regional level

1. Europe

6. The countries of Europe have for a long time had good civil registration and vital statistics systems and have produced quite reliable and timely vital statistics. Intensive use of vital records and statistics has been made by the Governments and the societies at large in many ways. Further, civil registration functions have, during the past decade, become increasingly computer-based, with data processing equipment becoming more efficient and cost-effective, especially with the advent of micro computers.

7. In a number of countries, civil registration and vital statistics systems are linked to population registers or are a part of them. For example, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have maintained population registers. There has generally been a trend towards centralized administration of the registers.

2. Asia and the Pacific

8. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has taken an active interest in the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in the region. Expert advisory services have been provided to countries in the past 10 years. In 1985, with financial support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Statistics Division of ESCAP organized two regional seminars on this subject. The Pacific Seminar on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics was held in Apia, Samoa, from 30 April to 6 May 1985 and was attended by representatives from 15 countries. The Asian Seminar on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 10 to 16 December 1985 and was attended by participants from 18 countries. These seminars discussed the status of the civil registration services, reviewed the progress made since 1968 when the first seminar for the region was held (Copenhagen), and identified a number of practical approaches and strategies to further improve civil registration and vital statistics systems. The proceedings of the seminars were brought out by ESCAP in 1987 in the publication Status of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

9. Further, ESCAP collaborated with the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics (IIVRS) in organizing an IIVRS Committee in Asia for the promotion of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asian countries. The Committee's report, Urgently Needed Reforms in Civil Registration in Asian Countries, 7/ was published in 1986 and sent to the ministries concerned in 16 Asian countries.

3. Latin America and the Caribbean

10. Two international workshops on civil registration and vital statistics have been conducted in this region. The first was held in Grenada from 13 to 15 October 1987, to address the problems facing the civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Caribbean countries. It was jointly sponsored by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). The 12 Caribbean countries that attended the meeting had formulated a plan of action, including necessary follow-up activities, for further development of civil registration and vital statistics in the region. The second workshop, on civil registration and vital statistics for health services planning, was held in Tobago from 6 to 9 June 1989. Thirty-six participants from 13 English-speaking Caribbean countries and international and non-governmental organizations attended the workshop. The workshop was organized by the Caribbean Community Secretariat in collaboration with PAHO.

11. The Inter-American Children's Institute, which is an affiliate of the Organization of the American States (OAS) and located in Montevideo, Uruguay, has sponsored civil registration activities in the region to promote the recording of vital events. A regional project on civil registration was implemented in the early 1980s to improve registration and vital statistics in the region with financial assistance from UNFPA. An important contribution of this project was the publication of Diagnosis of Civil Registration in Latin America, 8/ which included the results of a survey conducted in 18 countries. The Institute also organized subregional training courses for senior civil registration staff of the region.

4. Africa

12. The civil registration and vital statistics systems in most countries of the region are in an early stage of development and are in great need of both technical and financial support. In some countries, the system does not cover all groups of the population and all areas of the country, and require substantial improvement in coverage. However, a few countries or areas do have virtually complete birth and/or death registration and statistics. They are Algeria (births), Cape Verde, Egypt, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (births), Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles and Tunisia (births). Another 16 African countries have initiated a programme aimed at improving their civil registration and vital statistics systems during the 1980s. They are Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland and the United Republic of Tanzania.

13. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) held a meeting of the Working Group on the Development of Civil Registration Systems and Vital Statistics Collection in Africa, with the financial support of UNFPA, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 21 to 26 October 1986.

5. Western Asia

14. Eleven of the 12 Western Asian countries (all except Oman) have in operation civil registration systems that comprise the registration of live births, deaths, foetal deaths, marriages and divorces. Emphasis is placed on the registration of births and deaths.

15. In the majority of the countries the responsibility for the compilation of national vital statistics is vested in the central statistical office. However the civil registration functions are the responsibility of other ministries or departments. In Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic, the civil registration and vital statistics functions are carried out in the same ministry or department. Yemen and the Syrian Arab Republic had implemented reforms in their civil registration and vital statistics systems with assistance from the United Nations. In 1984 Kuwait established a computerized civil information system that includes registration of vital events and changes in place of residence. A personal identification number has been designed to link the records of an individual. In 1989, the Department of Primary Health Care in Qatar started to

computerize the registration of live births. Almost every country in the region attaches great importance to population registers and population identification for the purpose of providing services, a linkage that can lead to significant improvements in civil registration.

16. A meeting organized by the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics with financial support from UNFPA was convened in Cairo, Egypt, from 22 to 23 November 1989 to consider, inter alia, the setting-up and membership of a Committee of experts to promote the improvement of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in the countries of Western Asia and Northern Africa. The meeting discussed the outline of a report to be prepared to sensitize high-level governmental authorities on the subject in order to gain their support for the establishment or the improvement of national systems.

C. Work of non-governmental organizations

17. The International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics has worked vigorously since 1974 to stimulate, support and complement the efforts of international organizations, national Governments, and individual professionals working to improve vital registration and statistics systems in various countries. The Institute receives financial support from the United Nations Population Fund. Its major goal is to provide an international professional forum for the exchange of administrative and technical information and also of the experience gained by countries in civil registration and vital statistics endeavours. The members of the Institute are top decision-making officials responsible for one aspect or another of their country's civil registration and vital statistics systems. During the 1980s the number of national members grew from 175 (from 104 countries) to 368 (from 157 countries).

18. During the 1980s the Institute established three expert committees - one for Asia, one for Latin America, and one for Western Asia - to assess the status of civil registration and vital statistics in the respective regions. The committees made many recommendations for further action for the attention of senior officials in the national Governments of the regions. The Institute also maintained a roster of experts in civil registration and vital statistics, conducted a survey to determine the professional interests of civil registration and vital statistics professionals, and carried out several studies related to civil registration and vital statistics practices in various countries. It publishes a newsletter, The Chronicle, as well as a technical paper series.

19. A number of other non-governmental institutions, such as the International Statistical Institute and the International Union for the Scientific Study of the Population, have a general interest in civil registration and vital statistics matters and have made contributions toward their improvement.

II. ISSUES AND ADVANCES IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS

A. Issues in improving civil registration and vital statistics systems

20. Two major approaches have characterized developing country efforts directed at improving civil registration and vital statistics over the past two decades. The first approach involved the use of demonstration area projects and the second, the use of sample registration schemes of one sort or another.

21. Demonstration area projects were based on the idea that an endeavor as large as the improvement of a national civil registration system would not be successful unless it proceeded on the basis of a well-tested and phased approach. Over the past 10-15 years this strategy of concentration on the use of demonstration areas has guided most international support for the improvement of civil registration systems. Unfortunately, whatever its theoretical soundness, this strategy appears in practice to have actually hampered the improvement of national civil registration systems in many developing countries.

22. The demonstration area approach suffers from three principal drawbacks. First, by focusing registration activities in pilot or demonstration areas, it often leads to the development of methods and arrangements in the pilot areas which have little possibility for extension to the country at large, once external support ends. Secondly, once the pilot projects end, countries have to deal with two systems of registration and two systems of vital statistics: the national systems operating in the areas not included in the project, and the new systems implemented in the demonstration areas. Although the experimental activities sometimes contributed in important ways to upgrading the technical, management and operational aspects of the civil registration system and to raising awareness among the concerned staff and the public at large, the compilation of vital statistics for the country as a whole became somehow more difficult than before the project started. This was mainly because the Governments were not able to institutionalize the experimental systems country-wide, because many changes introduced in the content and design of the registration and vital statistics forms in the demonstration areas could not be introduced into the reporting forms used in the remainder of the country. Finally, the emphasis on demonstration projects meant that many countries that were ready and able to move beyond pilot projects to major systemic improvements in their national civil registration and vital statistics systems were cut off from even modest external support for those more fundamental and far-reaching improvements.

23. Another strategy employed in a number of developing countries, often with international assistance, was the use of sample registration schemes to generate much needed vital rates and basic estimates of fertility and mortality. Sample registration systems usually involve some procedure for actively canvassing and recording vital events on a continuous basis in national probability samples. Often the sample registration schemes are based on a dual-records-system approach of one sort or another. Dual systems provide for two methods of obtaining information about vital events (for example, continuous canvassing for events and a

retrospective household survey) and case-by-case matching of reported events. The results of the matching procedure are then used either to correct the results of one of the reporting systems or to provide estimates of vital rates adjusted for estimated omissions. However, the continuous recording of births and deaths under most sample registration systems is performed by an operation separate from the official vital registration system. As such, it has no impact on the official civil registration system which, over the years, is largely left unaffected in terms of coverage, quality and timeliness.

24. In India, for example, a sample registration scheme has been carried out for about three decades, from the early 1960s when it was introduced in a few States. 9/ By now, it has been extended to almost the whole country and the sample size enlarged so as to be able to produce data at major administrative area levels. At present, the system produces the required vital rates, the population growth rate and other fertility and mortality measures for the country, States and other major divisions on a continuous basis. However, the official vital registration in the States is far below the desired levels, since India has made no significant parallel efforts to improve its civil registration and vital statistics systems, which would have served both statistical, legal and administrative purposes. Bangladesh (since 1980), Pakistan (1962- 1965, 1985 and onwards) have also adopted sample registration systems to provide vital rates and other demographic measures on a continuous basis. Other countries have established dual records systems to test the completeness of the national civil registration system or to provide estimates of vital rates and other demographic indicators for a period of time. Among the latter were Liberia (1969, 1971), Nepal (1977-1981), the Philippines (1970, 1971), Sri Lanka (1981), Thailand (1964-1965, 1984-1986) and Turkey (1965, 1966, 1967). 10/

25. The periodic surveys, which are a component of many dual records systems, can be usefully adopted for evaluating the completeness of the official civil registration system in countries where the latter is satisfactory but improvements in coverage are still possible. No matter what alternative methods systems are used by countries to generate vital rates and other basic demographic parameters, they cannot replace a well functioning civil registration system in terms of providing data needed for small geographical areas on a timely basis.

B. Advances in technology and automation of basic functions of vital registration and statistics systems

26. With computers that have become simpler to operate and less expensive to install, and especially with the use of microcomputers in all parts of the world, civil registration systems in many countries are functioning better. For example, countries are turning to computer-based civil registration facilities to enhance and speed up their services to the public. Portable and easy-to-use software for data entry, editing and data tabulation can further expedite those activities. Priority functions such as keying the entire vital record, editing, retrieving, correcting, amending, preparing alphabetical indexes and issuing certificates are some ways in which modern technology can assist in a very efficient way. 11/ The automation of registration activities also permits (with the protection necessary

to ensure confidentiality) more intensive use of the data by other official agencies which make extensive use of vital records - e.g., statistical offices, population registers, population identification services, electoral rolls and the like. Thus, if proper co-ordination is made with the appropriate agencies of the country, the same data-base could serve many legal, administrative and statistical purposes, thus saving time and money. Furthermore, the storage and the safety of vital records are enhanced substantially, and their retrieval becomes easier as vital records can be located in a matter of a few seconds, compared to the lengthy manual process.

27. Many countries have witnessed increasing demands on the registration system for services and have responded by resorting to automated systems. The extent to which such systems have been developed varies from country to country, depending on the requirements of the particular country and on the availability of trained staff and equipment. Resorting to computer facilities to manage civil registration-related services has also been a natural consequence of the ever growing quantity of vital records that have to be handled on a continuous and permanent basis. Computer-based registration functions can be installed at both the local registration offices and at the regional and the central registration agency, depending on the availability of funds and skilled human resources to operate and maintain the equipment. The central registration agency, whether a national or a state office, can prepare central alphabetical indexes of vital records to assist in searching the records for certification purposes and to avoid duplication of registration. The entire system can be better monitored and administered. A number of countries in Asia and the Pacific, Africa and North and South America have already taken steps towards computerization of some priority registration functions. West Asian countries are moving towards computerization in their population registers, which include vital registration. The systems in Japan, Kuwait and Thailand are fully computerized now. The systems in Canada, England and Wales, the Northern European countries, and most parts of the United States of America include automation of vital registration.

28. A number of countries are opting for decentralized coding and data-capture to produce vital statistics, mainly with the assistance of microcomputers at stations in certain regions of the country. Other more advanced systems require data entry to be made at the source (local registration office) and transmitted directly either electronically over telephone lines or on floppy disks to the central agency. Editing of the vital records is also done at those levels. This procedure provides accurate and more timely data. It also eliminates the need for centralized staff for coding and data entry, the large office space to store the records, and the movement of vital records. The elimination of record handling overcomes a major obstacle - namely, the document-flow problems which in a number of countries hinders timely compilation and reduce the completeness of vital statistics.

29. Data-capture can also be done by scanners or optical disk systems for record storage, retrieval, and the printing of copies of vital records. This technology produces a high quality image that does not suffer from deterioration, as is the case of paper documents and microfilm. A high-resolution scanner is used electronically to capture record images, which are stored on optical disks. A

computerized indexing system provides for automated searching of the documents, with the amount of data entry for the index directly related to the number of variables needed for record identification.

30. The optical disk system provides a permanent storage medium for documents. It requires very little physical space, maintains excellent reproduction quality, and, when integrated with a computerized index, offers document retrieval at electronic speed. The system is also able to enter statistical information at the time of indexing, which results in the generation of vital statistics along with the processing of routine registration activities. In this way, a fast, cost-effective and efficient processing system for meeting the registration demands of the public and providing a capability for preparing relevant vital statistics can be implemented. The growing use of micro-computer-based optical disk systems in various situations makes them financially feasible. Optical disks provide an exact copy of the original document and use the full capabilities of the computer to locate, link and process the documents.

31. Other countries (Chile, Denmark, Kuwait, Netherlands and Sweden) have opted for a complete computerized registration programme in which the complete vital record data, including names and other descriptive particulars, are keyed and stored in mainframe computer systems. This approach has a significant data-entry cost associated with it, as has been documented in several states of the United States of America. 12/

32. Some registration systems have resorted to computer-assisted microfilming. Vital records are stored on microfilm and can be easily retrieved and duplicated with the assistance of computers. An exact copy of the original record can be produced. However, this procedure does not allow vital statistics data to be generated and requires separate data-entry and data-processing operations.

33. Although computerization of the vital registration-related functions is not yet wide-spread in developing countries, it clearly offers great promise for them. Microcomputers can assist vital registration functions because the computer memory, storage and processing speeds are large enough to compete favorably with those in mainframe computers. Regardless of the technique adopted, whether computer-based, computer-assisted microfilming, a combination of both, under the law of each country the originals of vital records have to be preserved either indefinitely or for long periods. For convenience, they may be kept in a distinct office. A combination of microfilming and computer-based systems may even better suit the countries' needs. Further, countries may have to consider modifications in their civil registration and vital statistics laws to ensure that the computer or microfilm records are legally acceptable backups of the original records.

C. Uses of vital records and vital statistics

34. Civil registration systems serve as a continuous source of statistics on live births, deaths, foetal and infant deaths, marriages, divorces etc. Thus, they enable local and national officials and the public to monitor natural growth and changes in fertility and mortality. They also provide certificates on registered

vital events occurring to individuals and thereof to meet legal and administrative requirements of a country.

35. The live birth, foetal death and infant death records provide the basis for public health programmes for post-natal care of mother and child, for programmes of vaccination and immunization, for assistance to the physically handicapped, and so forth. Because records include the causes of death, they are useful for epidemiological purposes as indicators of the existence of infectious diseases requiring immediate control measures, as well as for the identification of health problems. Vital registers may also be used in public safety, accident prevention and crime prevention programmes, in social security, military service and electoral rolls.

36. Marriage records may be used administratively as proof of establishment of a family or household and hence to initiate family-benefit programmes related to health, housing, etc. They also serve to clear administrative files on programmes dependent on marital status, alimony payments, etc. Divorce records serve similar administrative purposes.

37. Other important uses of continuous vital statistics derived from civil registration records lie in planning for economic and social development. The two components of natural growth of the population, births and deaths, determine the trend and rate of population growth at the national and sub-national levels. Estimates of population size as well as population projections can be made on the basis mainly of reliable vital statistics and therefore, population estimates and projections - e.g., school enrolment, child-bearing women, the elderly population etc. - will provide a useful basis for social and economic development planning and policies, their periodic evaluation and monitoring.

38. The rapid growth of the population in many countries became a matter of serious concern in the post-war period and gave rise to organized national programmes of family planning. For effective implementation of these programmes, annual fertility statistics classified by various social and demographic characteristics and by detailed geographical divisions are needed for understanding the situation and thereafter for planning, administration as well as evaluation of the programmes.

39. The earliest uses of vital statistics have been in the field of health to delineate major public health problems, to design health programmes and to evaluate health progress. Statistics on causes of death have been particularly useful in identifying the diseases of public health importance, and following the course of mortality associated with these diseases, and the characteristics of persons dying from these diseases are particularly useful in planning, conducting and evaluating control or prevention programmes.

40. The commitment by member States of WHO to achieve health for all by the year 2000 has given rise to further efforts aimed at the reduction of inequalities. Further, a number of population groups have been identified for special attention, among them women and children, the disabled, the elderly, migrants and refugees, minority groups and others. Thus, the need for data to

support the analyses of health situations extends not only to local area needs but to the needs of various population groups.

41. Of particular importance in relation to women's health is the problem of maternal mortality, an area in which WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF have been intensifying their efforts. The exact magnitude of the maternal mortality problems is unknown, as in many developing countries the cause of death are either not stated or stated by lay persons. Nonetheless, it has been estimated that worldwide at least 500,000 women die each year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

42. Child health is a problem of special importance in the developing countries. Deaths among children under five years have been estimated to account for about one-half of all deaths occurring in many developing countries. The exact proportions at both national and local levels are unknown owing to the problem of large omissions in the civil registration system of deaths occurring at an early age. Much can be done to improve the recording of deaths and their causes in the civil registration system.

43. To meet the data needs of these specific concerns and their focus on special population groups, complete, accurate and current vital statistics at the national and small geographical area level are essential. Civil registration is the only means of providing flow statistics at the required geographical levels and the main one to produce statistics on maternal mortality and characteristics of the child and its mother, so that more in depth studies on child and infant mortality can be made. Awareness of maternal, infant and child mortality has increased everywhere, including the least developing countries. Much of the child mortality is preventable by means of currently available tools and measures.

44. In the WHO Strategy of Health for All by the Year 2000, a number of minimum health goals have been established in terms of indices like average life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, and childhood death rate which require accurate death, birth and population statistics. Therefore, to plan, monitor and evaluate health strategies ranging from disease prevention and control and health promotion, reliable vital statistics are indispensable tools for the country as a whole as well as for its administrative subdivisions. This is of particular importance in the local areas where special population and health service programmes are being implemented. Under the emerging new directions of population and health service programmes, countries are facing an increasing need for vital statistics.

III. TECHNICAL CO-OPERATION ACTIVITIES AND FUTURE NEEDS

45. Technical co-operation activities of the United Nations for the improvement of national civil registration and vital statistics systems have been carried out through provision of advisory and consultant services, support for the acquisition of equipment, training of national officials engaged in civil registration and vital statistics activities. These activities were mostly funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and executed by the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development (United Nations/Secretariat) with substantive support provided by the Statistical Office (United Nations Secretariat). A brief account of these activities is given below.

A. Support for country projects

46. Between 1980 and 1989, 25 developing countries received United Nations technical and financial assistance for improving their civil registration and vital statistics systems. Sixteen countries are in Africa, seven in Asia and two in South America. The amount of funds allocated by UNFPA for all projects totalled $6.78 million, including $3.24 million for advisory services, mission and personnel costs, $0.93 million for training activities, $1.95 million for purchasing of data processing, microfilming, office equipment and vehicles and $0.65 million for preparation and publication of technical and methodological materials and others. Support was also given for local personnel costs in a limited number of civil registration projects to ensure a good start of the projects but were gradually passed on to the governments as the projects progressed.

47. Some projects were initiated to assist the Governments in preparing the legal framework and regulations for the establishment of a permanent and continuous civil registration system. Other projects helped the countries either to create an office of civil registration to oversee related activities or to strengthen the existing one. There are also projects to assist countries to redesign, test and verify the registration and statistics reporting procedures. Although the technical assistance provided by the projects was very useful for building up the required infrastructure for running the systems nationwide, the operation and maintenance of the systems usually slowed down considerably or even stopped after the external support to projects came to an end.

48. A pattern, common to all those projects, has been the adoption of the demonstration area approach. Following this approach, a few areas of the country were chosen and improved procedures for civil registration and vital statistics reporting were instituted. The successful results of this approach are expected to be followed by other areas of the country gradually. While the projects carried out at the demonstration areas were funded by international resources, the expansion was to be carried out mostly on Government's own support, both technically and financially. However, this has not happened, except in a very few countries.

49. An important component of the technical co-operation activities has been the advisory and consultant services. These services were rendered either by United Nations headquarters technical advisors, the United Nations regional commissions' regional advisors and experts and advisors associated with specific country projects. Their services included project formulation, systems' assessment, project monitoring and evaluation, project implementation, training, data processing, and so on.

50. At the regional level, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has not assigned a full time adviser to work on civil registration and vital statistics. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) had a full-time adviser on civil registration and vital statistics until 1982. In March 1985, a new regional adviser on population statistics was recruited whose duties included work in civil registration and vital statistics. In the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the functions of the two

regional advisers covered work in civil registration and vital statistics. The regional adviser in demographic statistics in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) also covered the work in civil registration and vital statistics. The United Nations Headquarters also had only one technical adviser devoted full time to the work of civil registration and vital statistics.

51. Despite the limited resources that are available for advisory services on a full-time basis, other advisers in demographic statistics have also been assigned to undertake missions to countries to assist in the improvement of their civil registration and vital statistics systems.

B. Training activities

52. Another key component of technical co-operation activities was training of governmental officials engaged in civil registration and vital statistics to enhance their professional and technical capabilities. Training activities were provided through fellowships, study tours, in-service training and training workshops. These have been provided either under national projects funded by UNFPA or under the regular budget of the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development.

53. During the 1980s, a total of 38 governmental officials were granted United Nations fellowships for studies abroad. Another 52 officials at the managerial and supervisory levels from 16 countries participated in short-term study tours to neighboring countries to learn about their civil registration and vital statistics systems or about ongoing projects related to the improvement of the systems.

54. Short-term in-service training through country projects have been provided to middle and low-level personnel working in the offices responsible for the civil registration and the vital statistics work. The trainees comprised local registration personnel, assistant registrars, local health workers including midwives, nurses, birth attendants, village elders, community and local area authorities, and so on. A notable and successful example of this type of training was that conducted in Kenya under the demonstration project from 1981 to 1984. A total of 4,118 district registrars, assistant registrars and health personnel had been trained. Similar activities were undertaken in Paraguay in 1987, where 53 officials were trained, and in Yemen in 1988-1989, where 170 officials were trained.

55. A special training workshop in civil registration and vital statistics was organized by the Department for Technical Co-operation for Development and the Statistical Office in Kenya, from 30 October to 8 December 1989. The workshop was designed to train a group of civil registration and vital statistics officials for three weeks. In the fourth and fifth weeks of the workshop, the participants were asked to train another group of officials and in the last week of the training, were asked to evaluate the training results. The first group was attended by 23 participants - 10 from Kenya, five from Swaziland, two each from Botswana, Ethiopia, Zambia and Somalia. The second group was attended by about 130 governmental officials from Kenya. This workshop was considered quite successful.

C. International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems

56. The Statistical Commission, at its twenty-fifth session in 1989, expressed its support for a new initiative towards accelerating the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems of the developing countries developed jointly by the Statistical Office, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics. This initiative was embodied in the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems, which is designed to encourage countries in taking necessary measures to remove the constraints and solve the problems that impede the development of their national systems. The Programme envisages that countries themselves will take the lead and carry out the necessary reforms to improve their systems, while the international community and organizations will provide guidance and technical impetus. The Programme endeavours to mobilize support from organizations of the United Nations system as well as from bilateral agencies and private organizations and undertake co-ordination with a view to securing maximal use of financial and technical resources for the strengthening and the improvement of national civil registration and vital statistics systems.

57. The Programme is designed to assist countries by:

(a) Providing guidelines for the self-assessment of both the existing country systems and ways of improving the system;

(b) Providing guidance for formulating a national plan of action;

(c) Disseminating and assisting in the preparation of handbooks and technical documents for use in the country system;

(d) Operating a clearing house of information on vital statistics and civil registration systems which will be responsive to needs of countries;

(e) Providing technical advice to countries at various stages of country project development;

(f) Supporting and carrying out training activities to increase the skills of nationals;

(g) Assisting countries in obtaining other necessary technical co-operation for proposed activities and projects and related support of national organizations.

58. The programme shifts the emphasis of international technical co-operation away from pilot studies and demonstration area approaches to solving specific problems existing in the current vital statistics and civil registration systems of the country. It is hoped that the various international, bilateral and private agencies will make changes in their guidelines on assistance so as to suit the new direction given by the Programme. The role of the Programme is to step up its

support for projects aimed at improving the vital statistics and civil registration systems and to provide limited technical guidance on doing so. It is envisaged that there will be broad support for the country projects from the various multilateral and bilateral agencies as well as from the country itself. A pre-requisite to country participation in the Programme will be a positive commitment to invest staff, time and resources by the country. The commitment, in the first phase of the Programme, will be the willingness of the Government to prepare the assessment of the current systems in accordance with a suggested outline, by developing a plan of action and by showing intent to implement necessary reforms. Because this requires the allocation of necessary funds, political support at the highest governmental level will be needed.

59. Another feature of the Programme is that it will take into account the present stage of development of the vital statistics and civil registration systems in a country so that specific problems prioritized for action can be pinpointed. The goal-setting, the short, medium- and long-term objectives, and the type of technical assistance, will be assessed accordingly, to suit the needs of each participating country. It is again stressed that a requirement for participation in the Programme will be a strong national willingness to invest time and resources in it.

60. For programme purposes, developing countries have been grouped into three categories:

(a) Countries which have the best prospect for a rapid attainment of complete birth and death registration - say, in a period of five years. These countries at present have 80 per cent or higher registration coverage of births and deaths;

(b) Countries which have a good prospect for a rapid attainment of complete birth and death registration - say, in a period of 10 years;

(c) Countries with poorer prospects for a rapid attainment of complete birth and death registration.

61. For the first group, technical and financial assistance, channeled through the Programme, will lead towards the consolidation of a comprehensive civil registration system from which complete and accurate vital statistics can be derived on a permanent basis. For the second group of countries, the objective is towards reaching complete coverage and production on a regular basis of reliable vital statistics. For the third group, the objective is to help countries establish solid technical and legal bases and to outline the necessary infrastructure for universal registration and vital statistics compilation.

62. The Statistical Office, in collaboration with the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development, is acting as the focal point in promoting the strategy for accelerating developments in these systems. It will be substantively responsible for the implementation, co-ordination and monitoring of the programme activities. Further, it is being joined by the United Nations Population Fund, the World Health Organization and the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics - the co-sponsoring institutions - which will be closely involved in

the planning and carrying out of the programme activities. Furthermore, the regional commissions are also being associated in promoting the programme activities in their respective regions.

63. The Programme will be carried out in phases, with the first phase being planned for 1991-1993. UNFPA has allocated funds ($280,000) for the training component of this phase. UNICEF has also indicated its intention to lend support. Two workshops are to be organized in the second and third quarters of 1991, one for countries in the Caribbean, and another for countries in Central and South America. Other workshops are planned in 1992 and 1993 for countries in Asia and Africa, respectively. To implement fully the proposed activities, additional resources are clearly needed, and the participation of multilateral and bilateral donor agencies and interested organizations and institutions is being sought.

IV. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

64. The commission may wish to:

(a) Review the progress made by developing countries in civil registration and vital statistics during the past years and consider further work including forms of technical co-operation activities needed for rapid improvement of the systems; and

(b) Comment upon and make suggestions for the implementation of the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems.

Notes

1/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.1990.XVII.

2/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.84.XVII.11.

3/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.73.XVII.9.

4/ United Nations publication, Sales No. 1955.XVII.1.

5/ Data estimated to be virtually complete - i.e., representing at least 90 per cent of the events occuring each year.

6/ See United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Status of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific, (ST/ESCAP/465) (Bangkok, 1987).

7/ International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics. Urgently Needed Reforms in Civil Registration in Asian Countries: A Report for the Consideration of the Governments of the Region (Bethesda, Maryland, IIVRS) (October 1986).

Notes (continued)

8/ United Nations Population Fund and Interamerican Children's Institute, "Diagnostico del Registro Civil Latinoamericano". Proyecto FNUAP-IIN, RLA/78/P14 (April 1982).

9/ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, op. cit., pp. 73-94.

10/ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, op. cit., pp. 73, 181, 211, 244, 279; Robert Meyers, "The dual record system: an overview of experience in five countries"; Laboratories for Population Statistics. Scientific Report Series No. 26 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, April 1976); Tito Mijares, "Development and maintenance of a sample vital registration system in the Philippines". Laboratories for Population Statistics, Scientific Report Series No. 19 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, November 1977); Joan Lingner, and Bradley Wells, "Organization and methods of the dual record system in India". Laboratories for Population Statistics, Scientific Report Series No. 9 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, October 1973).

11/ Vito Logrillo, Automation of Vital Registration Systems in the United States, Technical Papers, No. 40 (Bethesda, Maryland, International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics, April 1990).

12/ Ibid.